

Iran is designated by the U.S. State Department as among the world's top violators of religious freedom. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent body that does not speak for the U.S. government. But it is required by Congress to report to the U.S. Secretary of State every year on governments that abuse the religious liberty of their people.

Consistent with the annual State Department report on Religious Freedom, the recent Commission report says that the regime in Tehran "engages in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused." Over the past year, according to the report, the Iranian government's poor religious freedom record deteriorated, "especially for religious minorities and in particular for Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, and evangelical Christians." In addition, "heightened anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial rhetoric and activities by senior government officials have increased fear among Iran's Jewish community."

A number of senior Shi'a religious leaders who oppose the tenets or practices of the Iranian government have also been targets of state repression, says the report. A case in point is Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemini Boroujerdi, who opposes religious rule in Iran. He and a number of his followers were arrested and detained in October 2006. Ayatollah Boroujerdi was charged with the so-called crime of "sacrilege." It is believed that he and several of his followers remain in prison.

Freedom of religion is one of the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which Iran has ratified. The Declaration says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Unfortunately, this is yet another international standard Iran has failed to live up to.

Freedom of religion is the very first protection offered in America's Bill of Rights. But, says President George Bush, "Religious freedom belongs not to any one nation, but to the world."

President Bush has a message for those in Iran and elsewhere who suffer because of their religious beliefs: "You are not alone ... We work for the day when we can welcome you into the family of free nations. We pray that you and your children may one day know freedom in all things."